SHOW GREAT LOVE
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Psalm 43
Luke 7:36–50

"Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.
But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."
Luke 7:47 (NRSV)

You want to know how big God's love is?
The answer is: It's very big.
It's bigger than you are comfortable with.
Anne Lamott
Grace (Eventually) Thoughts on Faith

High up on the list of people I have most admired is Mstislav Rostropovich, the great Russian cellist who died two months ago. I admired him first for his courage. The Soviet Union, under dictator Josef Stalin, was suspicious and afraid of artistic freedom. Stalin had publicly reprimanded Rostropovich's teacher and mentor, Dmitri Shostakovich, and when his friend Alexander Solzhenitsyn came under attack by the state, Rostropovich and his wife invited the writer to stay in their home. Then, in 1970, Rostropovich made the mistake of expressing his support for artistic freedom and human rights in a letter to *Pravda,* the state-run newspaper. While he and his wife were in Paris, they were stripped of their Soviet citizenship, unable to return to their nation and home. Rostropovich continued his distinguished career in the West, and everywhere he went, he became a symbol of the courageous patriotism that led men and women to risk careers, life itself, to protest the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union. I admired his courage.

And I came to admire his passion for life, his exuberance and extravagant enthusiasm, his propensity to show great love. I heard him play a Dvorak cello concerto, one of his favorites, with the Chicago Symphony. It was one of those wonderful performances, at the end of which the audience sat in silence, mesmerized. And then he did an extraordinary thing: he stood up and kissed his cello. The audience erupted. Then he hugged and kissed a surprised Daniel Barenboim. Then he hugged and kissed the entire cello section before moving to the violins. He hugged and kissed most of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

I was deeply moved by pictures of him playing his cello in front of the Berlin Wall in 1989, as the wall was torn down and communism dissolved throughout Eastern Europe. Years later, I had the honor of meeting and talking with him. It was a dinner party in his honor, and because he insisted on sitting beside the young high-school cellist who was also present—and who is my granddaughter—I ended up sitting on the other side of him. He spent most of the evening in conversation with my granddaughter, asking her question after question. When he finally turned to me, I told him I had recently been in Berlin and the museum that stands where the old American Checkpoint Charlie was and saw there the video of him playing a Bach Unaccompanied Suite, sitting in front of the wall. He told me the whole story: how, when he and his wife saw the news of the wall coming down and knew that his own nation would soon be free, they knew they had to do something. So he took his cello and flew from Paris to Berlin, took a cab to the wall, realized that he hadn't thought about a chair to sit on, so crossed the broad open space in front of the wall, knocked on the door of the first house he came to, introduced himself, and asked if he could borrow a chair, carried the kitchen chair and cello back to the wall, and played Bach. He invited me to call him by the affectionate name "Slava" his friends used. At the end of our extraordinary evening together, he called for a toast, Russian style. We toasted Russia, the United States; we toasted freedom and J. S. Bach, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and my granddaughter about her music. Then starting with me, he hugged and kissed us, full face, every single one of us.

His passion and love for music, his country and freedom and people, his gratitude for the gift of life expressed in exuberant, extravagant love was contagious. Many of us were taught to curtail emotion and emotional displays, taught that public displays of affection are inappropriate and offensive: "Don't wear your feelings, or your religion for that matter, on your sleeve." Many of us could learn a thing or two about wholeness and love truly and fully expressed from this extraordinary human being. I thought about him this week as I pondered again one of the more fascinating characters in the Bible, a nameless woman who is also passionate and extravagant in her love.

Jesus was a dinner guest in the home of a Pharisee, a religious and community leader, by the name of Simon. The dinner was served on a low table, guests reclining on the ground, feet away from the table. As the guests arrived and the meal began, a servant poured cool water over the feet of each guest and dried them with a towel—a gesture of common, everyday courtesy. For some reason Simon neglected to extend this courtesy to Jesus. Some scholars think it was intentional. In any event, as the meal proceeds, an uninvited guest enters. The meal was served in an open courtyard visible and accessible from the street. So she simply walks in, carrying an alabaster jar of ointment, sees Jesus, is overcome with

emotion, starts to weep, kneels at his feet weeping, looses her hair, dries his feet, opens the jar, and anoints his feet with the ointment. There's a lot going on here right in the middle of a proper dinner party. It is a very intimate thing she is doing. It is extravagant. Ointment was very expensive, not something anyone would use for an everyday occasion. Worst of all, however, the woman was a sinner. What she had done to earn that description is not revealed. The loosened hair, the ointment, suggest to some that she was a prostitute. The point is she had no business being there, in the dining room of a proper, respectable, and respected religious leader.

Simon sniffs his displeasure. If Jesus was a prophet, as some are saying, he would know who this person is and ask her to leave. Jesus' response is to tell a story about a creditor who forgave a huge debt and a small debt. Who was more grateful? Simon falls into the trap: "the one to whom he cancelled the greater debt." He reminds Simon that the woman, the sinner, had extended the hospitality Simon had neglected and, then, the point: "her sins which are many are forgiven and she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

Jesus' purpose is to get into Simon's heart. Jesus had already accepted the woman and received her extravagant love. Obviously she knew about him. Obviously he had shown her an acceptance and grace that touched her deeply. Now he has his eye on Simon. He likes Simon, respects his integrity, his leadership, his devotion to his religion and its law. Simon likes Jesus, is intrigued with his authentic and strong teaching. They admire each other, but they have very different notions of what God wants. Simon concludes that God wants order and moral purity. God doesn't want a prostitute at the dinner table. God wants people like her to be on the outside, at least until she confesses her sins, mends her ways, and becomes presentable and acceptable.

Jesus doesn't mind the woman's presence at the table at all. He wants the woman as a present, not excluded, part of the company, not on the outside looking in. Simon's religion is exclusive. You have to be good to get in. Jesus' is inclusive. Simon expresses his religion by abiding by the rules; Jesus prefers the woman's passionate gratitude and extravagant love. Simon's religion pushes the woman—and people like her—away. Jesus accepts her, says, "You are welcome here."

Simon is offended by grace and so, sometimes, are we. Fred Craddock warns about coming down too hard on Simon. In a thoughtful commentary on this incident, he suggests that zeal for righteousness can make anybody self-righteous and prejudiced. Prejudice against the prejudiced is still prejudice, he says. After Jerry Falwell died recently, Will Willimon wrote a thoughtful and funny essay. Falwell regularly said things with which people

like Willimon and I, and maybe you, profoundly disagreed, divisive and mean things about people and causes that are important to us. Falwell had a way of bringing out our own self-righteousness. When Willimon was chaplain at Duke, a student dared him to invite Falwell to speak and he did. The faculty and student organization erupted in protest, reminding Willimon of all the outrageous and mean things Falwell had said over the years.

When it came time for Will to introduce Falwell for the speech, there were boos and hisses from the hostile audience. The speech was unremarkable, not particularly interesting, and not offensive. When it was time for questions, Willimon assumed things would get ugly, fast. The first question was confrontational. “You preach hate,” the young woman said. “How many African Americans do you have at Liberty University?” The audience responded with cheers and applause.

Willimon remembers Falwell responding, “Young woman, you could not have asked a question that hurts me more deeply.” Hissing and jeering. “It is my most regrettable failure. I have worked, prayed, recruited all over the country, and I regret to say that only 12 percent of our student body is African American. Now here at Duke,” he continued, “your endowment is 50 times greater than ours, you have had years to work on the problem. Do you know how many African Americans are enrolled at Duke? I’ll tell you. Six percent! I pray that you will let the Lord help you do better.” Dead silence in the packed auditorium (see “Charms of an Ideologue,” *Christian Century*, 12 June 2007).

Simon the Pharisee, a good man, was offended by Jesus’ grace, extended to the sinful woman. And sometimes we are offended by his grace extended to people like Simon.

It really is radical grace, and we don’t own it. It is not just for people for whom we have concern and sympathy. It really is for everyone. Willimon and Falwell.

In his new book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace,* Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian who teaches at Yale, explores the radical grace that is at the heart of Christianity. We have trouble with the whole notion of grace, he says, because in our heart of hearts, we don’t believe it. Everything has to be earned ultimately, paid for. God, we seem to believe, is a negotiator. You receive God’s grace as a reward for being good. Volf says American consumer culture simply doesn’t “get” grace at all. “There is no such thing as a free lunch. . . . Everything is for sale. . . . Everything must be paid for, ultimately.” Every gift warrants a gift in response: every dinner invitation must be answered with a reciprocal invitation, a payback. In a wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon, two couples are standing in the foyer saying good night after a dinner party. The husband of

the couple about to leave has his wallet out and says, “Since we’re not into payback dinners, would $80 be acceptable for a reasonably pleasant evening?” (Volf, p. 40).

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says, “The true God is a God who cannot stop giving and forgiving, and our knowledge of this God is utterly bound up with our willingness to receive from the hand of God the liberty to give and forgive” (Introduction, *Free of Charge*).

God has arranged it so that being forgiven and forgiving go together: receiving and giving are part of the same experience, being loved and loving creates synergy, energy, passion, extravagance. And being a Christian means showing great love.

That’s what Simon didn’t get. And that’s exactly what the woman did: expressed an extravagant, passionate, deeply grateful love because somehow she had discerned the good news, the gospel truth, that she was accepted and loved, welcome and at home in the grace of Jesus Christ.

That’s what the church is for, by the way: a place where sinners, all of them, respectable sinners and not-so-respectable sinners, are welcome; a place where those who are excluded elsewhere are included, a place brave and strong enough to extend hospitality, particularly to those, like that woman, who are denied hospitality, marginalized, kept outside.

Frederick Buechner said the church lives when “for Christ’s sake we are willing to look like fools: when we understand that without simplicity and passion and outlandishness no church is worth ten cents” (*A Room Called Remember,* p. 125).

Now when we talk about God’s radical grace and infinite forgiveness, someone always wants to start with a worst-case scenario. “Surely God won’t forgive Adolph Hitler, or Josef Stalin, Pol Pot, or Saddam Hussein,” we say confidently and a little self-righteously. When I tried that tack once, a wise mentor said, “Why don’t you start a little more modestly? In stead of the worst sinner in history, start a little closer to home—someone you don’t care for—or start with yourself, for that matter.”

In her latest book, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott tells about learning that lesson through the Carpet Guy, her own experience of radical grace—eventually, but not without a long struggle. She teaches Sunday School in her small Presbyterian church and one day bought a carpet remnant for her classroom for fifty dollars. She took the carpet home and unrolled it and discovered a large patch of mold. The carpet simply would not do for her Sunday School children. She returned the carpet. The bookkeeper wasn’t in then, but she was promised that the money would be

refunded later. When she returned the next day, the owner said that someone had already picked up the money. “Impossible,” Anne said. “Someone picked it up an hour ago,” the owner replied. Lamott telephoned other teachers. No one had picked up the money. There must be a mistake. She returned to make her case, only to confront an equally adamant proprietor. “Someone picked up the money.” “Look,” she said, in her sternest Sunday School teacher voice, “I don’t want to make trouble. But no one picked up the money. I’d like it. Now.”

He tapped the ledger and the column of checks written—one for fifty dollars.

“That doesn’t mean anything. I’m from a Sunday School. This is for little children.” For good measure she added, “with asthma.”

Well, it escalated from there, to say the least. Lamott threatening, becoming very angry, bringing in friends to help, more confrontations, more obstinacy, now she’s using bad language. Finally the carpet guy writes a check for fifty dollars, and in deep satisfaction and vindication and self-righteousness, she takes it to the bank to cash it, only to find there are insufficient funds.

She writes, “I sat outside the bank for a while. Look, I said to God, it’s to you. . . . Then I sat in the sun and started to laugh. I felt deep inside that I’d gotten it, though I could not quite have said what I’d gotten. I didn’t get the delicious taste of release I’d been expecting when a wrong has been righted, but I got something better, a kind of miracle.”

“Now what am I supposed to do?” she asked God, and after a few minutes knew. One has a moral obligation to clean up one’s side of the street. So she took the carpet guy some flowers, with the bounced check and a note: “I am very sorry for the way I behaved. Anne.”

“You want to know how big God’s love is?” she asks. “The answer is: it’s very big. It’s bigger than you’re comfortable with.”

Putting Anne Lamott and the great philosopher-theologian Paul Tillich together is itself pretty funny, but Tillich said it, too:

“The history of humankind is the history of men and women who . . . wasted themselves out of the fullness of their hearts. People are sick, not only because they have not received love, but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves. Do not suppress in yourself or others, the abundant heart, the waste of self surrender.”

The good news is about God’s passion, God’s extravagant love, the symbol of which is a cross, and the life of a precious Son, the very one who one day said, “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven: hence she has shown great love.”

So hear the good news.
You are forgiven and accepted.
You are the recipient of the grace of Jesus Christ.
Be grateful. Be extravagant.

Show your love for your dear ones—for your family, friends, your country.
Show your gratitude to God for this beautiful world, the miracle of your life, for grace, acceptance, forgiveness, God’s welcome—in Jesus Christ.

And—do show great love.